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TOP STORY

Courts give veterans a chance to pull their lives together

By Jim Walsh, Tribune Staff Writer
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Judges, politicians and government officials speak about the benefits of establishing the new East Valley Veterans Court, but U.S. Coast Guard veteran Christopher Bilandzija is living proof that the concept works.

Bilandzija, a Coast Guard veteran, once had three different misdemeanor cases pending in three different courts while he was a patient in a U.S. Veterans Administration substance abuse program.

After appearing before Judge Pro Tem Gregg Maxon, a retired brigadier general in the Arizona National Guard, on a traffic case, Bilandzija got his life in order. He serves as a mentor and an inspiration to other veterans appearing on charges before Maxon in the new East Valley Regional Veterans Court.

“Six months ago, you would not recognize me. I was homeless and battling substance abuse,” Bilandzija said. “It gives me opportunities to work with the judge to help other veterans.”

He said the substance abuse treatment program helped him to address the reason why he was getting arrested. It was the sort of recommendation Maxon gives defendants all the time at his Veterans Court sessions in Mesa and Tempe.

“Thank you to the VA and to the veterans court for saving my life and allowing me to fight for a cause greater than myself,” Bilandzija said.

The regional Veterans Court expands the concept beyond Mesa, Tempe and Phoenix to include all East Valley cities except Guadalupe and Apache Junction. Veterans with cases in the Chandler, Gilbert, Scottsdale, Fountain Hills, Paradise Valley and Carefree-Cave Creek courts are coming to Tempe to have their cases heard by Maxon.

The regional court has been operating in Tempe since July but an event to announce it and celebrate it was held at the Tempe City Council chambers on Nov. 9, two days before Veterans Day.

Called a “therapeutic court,” the veterans court gives defendants a second chance, typically putting veterans charged with misdemeanors on probation and referring them to a wide variety of services.

Outreach workers from the Veteran’s Administration and from other agencies are present during court proceedings and meet with veterans shortly after they sentenced. The veterans often revert back to their military training, often standing at attention when they appear before Maxon, who uses his deep military knowledge to work out a treatment plan with the social service agencies.

Maxon and other veterans court judges dismiss the case if a veteran “graduates” by completing the treatment plan. Court officials have reported a low recidivism rate.

Mary Anne Majestic, retired presiding judge of Tempe City Court, said the idea of forming a veterans court in the East Valley first came up at a breakfast meeting of judges in 2014 over coffee and bagels.

The popular cause of helping veterans, who have a special series of issues related to their military service, was so popular that the judges were committed to overcoming the usual jurisdictional issues to make a regional veterans court possible, she said.

“There was never one person who said no. Everyone’s goal was about the veterans,” she said.

Maxon said the East Valley veterans courts have served about 500 veterans in their relatively short existence. Other officials said the East Valley has a large number of veterans, with 30,000 in Mesa alone and 15,000 in Chandler.

Tempe Municipal Court received a \$100,000 grant from the Arizona Department of Veterans Services to help establish the East Valley Regional Veterans Court. The money comes from the Arizona Veterans' Donation Fund.

“I would like every veteran in Arizona to have an opportunity to go to a veterans court,” Maxon said, largely because the court serves as a conduit to get them the services they earned as part of their military service.

“I have had veteran say that getting arrested was the best thing that happened” to them, he said.

Maxon said that veterans tend to respond to a structured treatment program, another throwback to their military training. He stressed that veterans still need to have a desire to change their lives for the program to be effective.

“You are the person who has to do the work,” Maxon said. “It’s not a free pass. We hold them accountable.”

Tempe Vice Mayor Robin Arredondo-Savage, who served three years in the Army, said she is proud of Tempe’s role in bringing veterans courts to the East Valley.

“I think we are very fortunate to have the resources to give veterans a second chance. It’s been a great success,” she said.